

Lent 5 (A) - Raising of Lazarus

It's hard to know where to begin this Sunday. It's hard to find the words for what we are all experiencing right now and to even start to make any sense of it. So I think our Gospel reading is one that's really appropriate, because it speaks to us of loss and confusion and uncertainty. The problem is, it can be hard to get that because the story is so familiar to most of us. We hear:

A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany...

and we immediately think, "Oh yes, I know this one. This is where Lazarus dies, but Jesus makes everything better by raising him back to life." And yes, that's true for the most part, but it skips over all that happened before Lazarus walks out of the tomb. And more importantly, it skips over the fact that *no one* at the time, apart from Jesus, knew what was going to happen. Just let that sink in for a minute: not a single person there could have anticipated that that day was going to end with Lazarus sitting in the house with his family again. It would have been the last thing anyone would have guessed - because it's crazy. It's unbelievably crazy to think that a dead man was going to walk out of his own tomb.

So try putting yourself in the place of one of the people there at the time. Try being Mary or Martha or one of the disciples. How would you have seen the day going? You'd probably hope that Jesus would

make you feel a bit better. Maybe he'd say something comforting and stay for dinner and perhaps distract you a bit from the overwhelming grief. The best you would really have hoped for is to feel that you're not alone in such awful circumstances...that's probably the best any of us hope for in the midst of tragedy. But Lazarus would still be dead, and life would have to go on without him. It's just how things are. There's a predictability and a certainty to that, and it can be comforting in a strange way, because we know what to expect. There's an inevitability to how this will go: a loved one dies, we mourn the loss, we find a way to adjust to life without them. So try to imagine how disorientated, how completely thrown, everyone was by the turn that things take with Jesus there. It seems predictable at first, he is moved by how upset everyone is, he wants to visit the tomb - maybe to pay his respects, he weeps along with the other mourners.

But that's not the end of the story, because Jesus doesn't buy into the certainty that everyone takes for granted. He flips their expectations - and God does this to us over and over again. He takes what seems like a hopeless situation and brings about something completely unexpected. Lazarus walks out of the tomb. In an instant, sorrow turns into joy, despair gives way to hope, Lazarus emerges from darkness into dazzling light. There must have been a very long moment where everyone stood frozen in shock, their brains desperately trying to get to grips with the fact that their whole world

had just shifted. The script has just been thrown out of the window, and no one knows what's supposed to happen next.

And I imagine that's how most of us are feeling right now. There's no script for what we're going through - we're all just having to make it up as we go along. We long for the comfort of predicability. I can't count the number of times over the last couple of weeks that I've said the phrase "When things get back to normal" when I'm reassuring a wedding couple or trying in vain to make some plans in advance. Because there's nothing "normal" about life right now: our churches are shut, our kids are cooped up at home, our conversations with neighbours are held at shouting distance. It makes sense that people are anxious, that some are still in shock, that we all want answers. But we've been told to settle in for the long haul...that this is the new "normal" for awhile. So where can we find any comfort?

Well, we can start with this story of Lazarus. When Jesus arrives at Bethany, he is met first by Martha. Listen again to their conversation:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to him, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Martha was hoping only that Jesus would have stopped the inevitable. If he'd arrived earlier, he could have healed Lazarus and prevented his

death. Even though Martha confesses her belief that God will give Jesus whatever he asks for, I don't think we can read this as Martha having made the leap to believing Jesus will raise her brother from the dead. Because when Jesus says that's exactly what will happen, she misunderstands him and thinks he is talking about the final resurrection that the Pharisees believed in. So Jesus tells her plainly that he's not there to stop the inevitable, he's there to completely redefine 'inevitable'.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

There is a type of believer who would like to think that following Christ means having a particular kind of certainty. That all you have to do is apply the right formula of rules to follow and Bible verses to quote and you will have life all sorted out. But I think the Gospel proves to us again and again that a life of following Jesus is pretty much guaranteed to bring with it a fair amount of *uncertainty*, that we're often going to be surprised by the unpredictable. But there's something more important that the Gospel tells us, too. Think about the familiar narratives where things don't turn out as people expected when Jesus appears on the scene: a dead man raised to life, a paralysed man suddenly able to walk, a respected rabbi striding into the Temple and overturning tables. Notice that every time events take an unexpected turn, that's when God is at work. The point at which

Jesus' followers have absolutely no control over what's going on is the point at which God's most powerful work is done. What this is teaching us is that we shouldn't expect predictability in life. Just because we're Christians doesn't mean we've got it all figured out. What we *can* be certain of is that God is constantly working in us and through us. And when things are at their most uncertain and the script has been thrown out the window, we should be looking for where God is at work, because there is likely to be something pretty powerful going on.

And I think we can already see that in our communities. We are living through unpredictable times and there is no script for what happens next. Nobody can say exactly how long it will be before we can meet together again in person. There's a joking comment making the rounds on social media that says, "I didn't expect to be giving up *this* much for Lent", and I suspect the Church will look back on this time as the longest Lent ever. But look how we as a community have responded. Yes, we're worried and anxious and climbing the walls. But we're also taking care of each other. People are calling each other and checking in on neighbours and volunteering to run errands for complete strangers. Villages are rallying behind they're local businesses to try to keep them going through this shutdown. My Facebook feed is now full of colleagues live streaming the Daily Office from their homes and friends posting messages of scarce items they can share around. All of us are suddenly more appreciative of services we sometimes take for

granted...when was they last time any of us thanked a grocery store cashier for simply doing his job?

So I ask you this: what more proof do we need that God is at work in all this uncertainty? *That* should be our comfort right now. We can't predict how the next few weeks and months are going to go, but we can be sure that God isn't wasting any of this time. Let's focus on that. Let's focus on where God is at work and do our best to join in, because we may not be able to see where this is going, but God is our hope and God is our certainty. May we all hang on to that hope and that certainty in the days ahead. Amen.